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Lincoln and Douglas

In Charleston

By WILLIAM E. BARTON



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An Address by
WILLIAM E. BARTON

Delivered at the Sixty-Fourth
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Lincoln and Douglas

In Charleston

Charleston does well to celebrate thus largely and worthily the sixty-fourth anniversary of the most notable event in her history. The seven debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas have given to seven Illinois cities an enduring name in literature. Wherever the story of Lincoln is told, the name of this city must be mentioned. Modern Charleston has shown becoming pride in her heritage, and has manifested that pride anew in the solemnities and festivities of this day. This notable procession, reproducing so many of the features of the procession of sixty-four years ago: the assembling of these thousands of people in the open air on this central space adjacent to your court house; the music and the addresses already delivered from this platform, make this a day to live anew in memory, and give the children of the present generation one more reason to remember what made this day illustrious in the experience of their fathers. Nature has been kind to us: the beauty of this autumn sunshine lends itself well to the spirit of this occasion. We shall long remember this day.

Let us remind ourselves anew of the events of that gathering of sixty-four years ago, and recall some of the scenes that on that occasion were enacted. Let us also consider the significance of that event, that we may the better understand the full meaning of this one.

It is unfortunate that so many historians and biographers of Lincoln have felt the necessity of making the strongest possible contrast between Abraham Lincoln and all the men with whom he was intimately associated. There is no reason why we should belittle other men to make Lincoln seem great. He was great enough to find his own elevation above his contemporaries, even when they are measured at their full stature. He who reads sixty-four years after the event the speeches of Lincoln and Douglas is

impressed with the fact that Lincoln had in Douglas a foeman distinctly worthy of his steel.

Abraham Lincoln was the greatest man of his generation, but Stephen A. Douglas is not a man to be held in contempt.

Of the seven debates between these two great men the one at Charleston has, like each of the others, some points of special interest. While this was not the largest of the gatherings, it was one of the larger ones, and it had some unique features of picturesqueness.

Lincoln and Douglas both spent the preceding night, Friday, September 17, in Mattoon and drove over on the morning of the debate. Each one headed a great procession. In some respects the Charleston processions, starting as they did from the same point, and arriving almost simultaneously, were more picturesque than in any other place where a debate was held. In each one there were thirty-two maidens representing the thirty-two states of the Union, though in Lincoln's procession Kansas rode alone, behind the others, and wore the legend "I Will Be Free." The Lincoln procession had a wagon drawn by oxen, reproducing that in which Lincoln himself had driven across Coles county from Indiana in the spring of 1830. There was a banner on which a diminutive Lincoln was smiting a mighty Douglas with a club, and "the Little Giant" was being put out of commission by "Abe, the Giant Killer." Women had their part in politics in that day. A wagon load of maidens who were for Lincoln bore the inscription:

"Westward the star of empire takes its way;
The girls link-on to Lincoln,
Their mothers were for Clay."

It was in Charleston that Lincoln led off with a strong reply to the question whether his political views concerning the negro involved a belief in negro equality. He said:

"I do not understand that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave, I must necessarily want her for a wife."

The Charleston debate is always remembered in connection with a personal incident of dramatic character. Lincoln had served for a single term in Congress, during

the Mexican War. He did not believe in that war. He believed that it was begun as an instrument of injustice and for an unworthy cause. He believed that its real purpose was to add to the American union new states where slavery was to be legalized. While he was in Congress, Mr. Ashmun of Massachusetts introduced an amendment in which he declared that the Mexican War was unnecessary, and that President James Polk had exceeded his constitutional authority in its inception. For that resolution Lincoln voted. In the course of the earlier debates, Senator Douglas attacked the record of Mr. Lincoln in Congress, declaring that in this particular he had been unpatriotic. Lincoln admitted having cast this vote, and was proud of it; but he also wished it to be understood that, the war having begun, he voted for every measure to supply the troops in the field with all that was necessary to bring the war to a speedy and successful termination.

When the Charleston debate occurred, there sat on the platform Hon. Orlando B. Ficklin, a member of Congress, and a Democrat. Mr. Lincoln, in the midst of his closing speech, turned to him, and led him to the front of the platform, and required an answer from him, whether Lincoln, having indeed voted for the Ashmun amendment, did not loyally support the soldiers in the war. Mr. Ficklin was a political opponent of Lincoln, but was his personal friend, as he was a friend also of Douglas. Ficklin was a man of honor, and he admitted that Lincoln told the truth in regard to his own record on the Mexican War. In a debate of this character, every personal incident has a particular interest, and the Ficklin incident, creditable alike to Lincoln and to Ficklin, stands out as one of the best remembered events of the day.

The events which led up to the Lincoln-Douglas debate were honorable to both the principal participants. It was a strong conviction of duty, though not unmixed with political ambition, which brought Lincoln back into politics in 1854, after he supposed himself permanently to have withdrawn. For the first time in his legal career he was then a lawyer first and only incidentally a politician; before that he had been a politician first and a lawyer as a

congenial and necessary accompaniment. When Lincoln returned to Illinois after his one term in Congress, he was at first bitterly disappointed in his failure to secure appointment as Land Commissioner of the United States. There is no disguising the sorrow of his discovery that Zachary Taylor, whom he had done so much to elect, did not reward him with a position in Washington. Failing in this, Lincoln set himself to practice law, lost interest in politics, and was prospering as he never had prospered before. But the repeal of the Missouri Compromise woke him by its affront to his conscience, and he returned to politics under a strong compulsion of duty. It does not answer this statement to reply that he hoped also to have been United States Senator in 1854, and was again disappointed when Lyman Trumbull was selected instead of himself. The whole incident is highly creditable to Abraham Lincoln. When he came back into politics he came with a conscience keenly alive to the evils and dangers of slavery in the political and moral life of America.

On the other hand, we must respect Stephen A. Douglas for the events which gave Lincoln's candidacy its hope of success in 1858. Douglas had broken with the Buchanan administration, and the reason was highly to the credit of Douglas. The administration had tried to force upon the unwilling people of Kansas a constitution known as the Lecompton Constitution, which they had never accepted and which would have made Kansas a slave state. Because Douglas would not support this measure in the Senate, he won the enmity of Buchanan and all the Buchanan office holders in Illinois.

The United States Senate chamber can never hold more people than packed it, floor and galleries, on the night of March 22, 1858. On that afternoon it was reported that at seven o'clock Stephen A. Douglas would speak in opposition to the measure of his own party. Those who had seats in the gallery in the afternoon held them, and others packed in until all rules were broken and the place was as full as it could be packed. Douglas had been sick in bed for two weeks, and he spoke without assurance that he would have strength to finish. He knew that he called

down on him the wrath of the extreme pro-slavery element in the Democratic party; he knew that the administration would do its best to defeat him in his approaching campaign. But he made his speech and renounced James Buchanan and all his works. He made it plain that he was not speaking as a Republican or an Abolitionist, or even as an opponent of the extension of slavery. His reason, many times reiterated, was that the Lecompton Constitution did not represent an honest vote of the people of Kansas. He said in so many words that if the principle of popular sovereignty were respected, he would accept it regardless of the slavery issue; it was none of his business, or of the Senate, whether Kansas decided to be a free state or a slave state. He even used that incautious sentence that, if this principle were safeguarded, he cared not whether slavery was voted up or voted down.

So far as I have discovered, Douglas did not repeat that statement, but Lincoln saw to it that he was not permitted to forget it.

Lincoln did care, and he knew that in his deepest soul Douglas cared. But Douglas was in a political situation which made it impossible for him to care effectively, and he was loyal to his principle of "squatter sovereignty."

Lincoln, when he became a candidate for the Senate in 1858, knew that Horace Greeley favored such action on the part of the Republicans of Illinois as should insure the election of Douglas. Indeed, there was some possibility, or so it seemed, that Douglas might become a Republican, as Trumbull and other influential Illinois Democrats had done. Lincoln determined to take higher ground than the Whig party had ever dared take, and he took it in his "house-divided-against-itself" speech.

Douglas had some right to appeal to the constituency of Lincoln for support. He was suffering persecution from the administration for fighting what he tried to think was their battle again the extreme pro-slavery wing of the Democratic party. He declared that it was not true that the American house could not stand if divided on the slavery issue; it always had stood, though part of the states held slaves and others did not.

So far as the quarrel was between two wings of the Democracy, Lincoln could afford to be an amused spectator. His was the cheerful neutrality of the settler's wife—"Go it, husband—Go it bear!" But Lincoln went much more deeply than this into the matter at issue. These two truths he mercilessly hurled at Douglas: The slavery issue was a moral issue, and every right-minded man ought to care whether it was voted up or down; and, The slavery issue was not a sectional but a national issue.

Douglas had broken with the Buchanan administration on the question of the Lecompton Constitution for Kansas, and Douglas was right. He had refused to be a party to the nefarious scheme of forcing a slave constitution upon Kansas. But in so doing he had taken pains to affirm that he took his position not as an Abolitionist or even as an opponent of slavery, but only as an advocate of popular sovereignty. If the people had a free vote, he cared not whether slavery was voted up or voted down. That unguarded remark of Douglas Lincoln used with telling effect. If the slavery question was not a moral question, he said, then Judge Douglas had a right to say that he did not care whether it was voted up or voted down. But Lincoln maintained that the slavery question was a moral question and that it was a national question. He had introduced the campaign with the declaration that this government cannot permanently remain half slave or half free. Douglas said that it had so remained from the beginning and the founders of the republic distinctly intended that the slavery question should be a question for each state to determine for itself. Lincoln replied that while the founders of the republic saw no present way to deliver the nation from the evil of slavery they recognized it as an evil, whereas Douglas could not consistently think of it as an evil, for if he did so he could not say that he cared not whether it was voted up or voted down.

Here was where Lincoln had his great advantage, and he pressed it mercilessly. The slavery issue was one which could not be treated longer as having only a commercial or political character. It was a moral wrong and a national disgrace. Lincoln did not see any immediate way

in which slavery could be abolished, but he took his stand squarely against any extension of it, and as in favor of its ultimate extinction.

The house was divided. The political house of Douglas was divided, and it was his fate to divide it still worse. Not only did he not win the support of the "Black Republicans" as he publicly called them, but he alienated the extreme southern Democrats. The speech in which he sought to make himself master of a divided house was the speech that ultimately kept him out of the White House. It was a brave speech, but it made it possible later to say, "Lincoln split rails, and Douglas split his party." Douglas won the Senatorial re-election; he may be said to have won it by his courage in opposing the administration; but he lost the higher prize, and he proved a good loser. The last time he and Lincoln stood on the same platform was on March 4, 1861, when Douglas held Lincoln's tall, shiny new hat, and Lincoln read his inaugural address as President of the United States.

The seven cities in which these memorable debates occurred have reason to commemorate with pride their share in the defining of an issue which the two men clearly faced and which did not subside until the house ceased to be divided against itself, and the whole nation became free.

Little did Charleston realize on that notable day, sixty-four years ago, what momentous issues hung upon a political meeting held within her borders. On that day this town became one of the great battle-fields where human history was made. Not merely an election to the Senate depended upon the discussions of which this was one, but the election of a President, and the questions which accompanied that election, greater in their moment than any man could have imagined. The issues here discussed were not to be settled until the battle here fought was waged on wider and redder fields. Then the world understood the full meaning of the things of which Lincoln and Douglas talked in Charleston. The house is no longer divided. We are one nation, and that whole nation is free.





